

Le père Henri Bosmans sj (1852-1928) *Michel Hermans and Jean-François Stoffel (eds.)*
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In 2006 in Brussels and in 2008 in Namur, some study days were organized devoted to Henri Bosmans and the proceedings are captured in this issue of the *Bulletin de la Classe des Sciences*.

Bosmans was a Jesuit priest, and a mathematician. He published about 300 papers, mainly on the history of mathematics. He is important for our Belgian Mathematical Society because the *Mathematical circle* created in 1921 and chaired by *Théophile De Donder* was renamed as the *Belgian Mathematical Society* (or *Société Mathématique de Belgique* as it was probably called in those days) and Henri Bosmans became the president from 1923 till 1925.

Bosmans was born on 7 May 1852 from a father in the military, then stationed in Mechelen, and a mother from Ghent. He studied philosophy and entered the Jesuit order in 1871. After his theology studies in Leuven, he was ordained on 8 September 1885, and was a mathematics professor in the *Collège Saint Michel* in Brussels from 1887 on for the rest of his life. In the minutes of the meeting of the BMS we find¹:

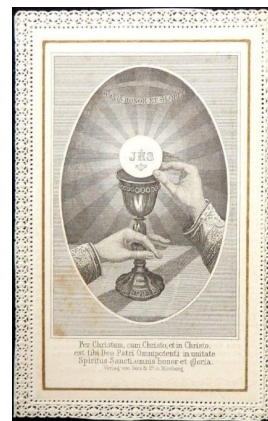
Séance du 25 février 1928. En ouvrant la séance, M de la Vallée Poussin, président, rend un hommage ému à la mémoire du R.P. Bosmans, ancien président de la Société pour la période 1923–1925. Il rappelle la longue carrière professorale au Collège St Michel où il forma une pléiade d'élèves futurs ingénieurs et officiers. Il évoque les remarquables travaux sur l'histoire des mathématiques et le labeur infatigable de l'historien qui, presque aveugle, ne continuait pas moins ses patientes recherches. Il était d'ailleurs assidu de nos réunions mensuelles.

His scientific career came along with his arrival in Brussels. It started by questions sent to *L'intermédiaire des mathématiciens* which he answered under an alias *H. Braid*. Around the turn of the century, he started writing bibliographical papers and engaged in the history of sciences and mathematics in particular. This earned him national and international recognition. Because of a disease, he was practically blind since 1913. This moved him away from teaching towards more historical research. Notwithstanding his vision problem, he meticulously copied many original sources that are still very important today for historians. He published books on fellow Jesuits: *Ferdinand Verbiest, directeur de l'observatoire de Péking*, *L'œuvre scientifique de Matthieu Ricci S.J.*, *Le jésuite mathématicien anversois*, *André Tacquet*, *Le géomètre Jérôme Saccheri S.J.* and *L'œuvre scientifique d'Antoine Thomas de Namur S.J.* A complete bibliography is in these proceedings compiled by Albrecht Heeffer, but it is also available online².

The booklet contains much more details about the Bosmans family, the education and the teachers of Henri Bosmans, his network (collaborators, librarians, bollandists, scientific societies).



Henri Bosmans (1852-1928)



Souvenir of his ordination 1885

¹Le Père Henri Bosmans et la Société Mathématique de Belgique, by Michel Hermans sj and Paul van Praag

²<http://logica.ugent.be/albrecht/bosmans.php>



Collège Saint Michel 1920

One contribution is devoted to Paul Mansion (1844-1919) who was Bosmans's teacher in Ghent and with whom he kept in correspondence in his further career. Letters from Mansion to Bosmans, now in the Jesuit archives, are discussed in more detail in a separate paper of these proceedings.



Paul Mansion

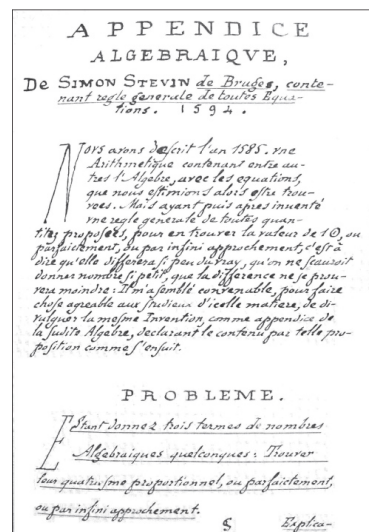
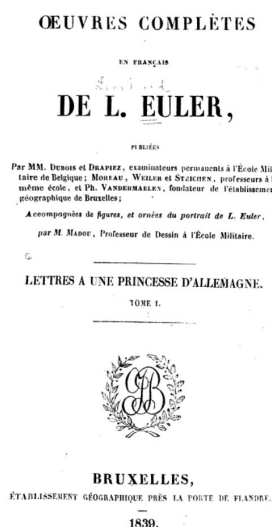
Another one concerns the Jesuit Girolamo Saccheri (1667-1733) who is mainly remembered for his work on non-Euclidean geometry, long before Bolyai and Lobachevsky. This is thanks to work done in Italy and Belgium. Beltrami (Turin) and Mansion (Ghent) saved his work from oblivion. Later, Saccheri and his work was further analysed by another Italian-Belgian twosome: Corrado Segre (1863-1924) in Turin and Bosmans in Brussels,

J. Mawhin discusses in his paper the Belgian attempt in 1839 to publish the complete works of Euler in French. Finally five volumes were published³. Bosmans has devoted a careful analysis on this work and its editors.

Most of Bosmans's biographical work is devoted to scientists that belonged to his own Jesuit Order. Clearly because he had access to the archives, but also just because many of the scientists happened to be Jesuits. The connection between Jesuits and China is well known. Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-1688) is one the exponents. But Bosmans also wrote about the exchange of knowledge and information from and to China. The sources he used (and missed) are exposed in another paper.

Two papers are devoted to the methods used by Bosmans and historiography in general at the beginning of the 20th century (in Belgium). Another one describes the archives and their importance. After his death the archives were split into the printed work, that mainly concerned the history of mathematics and that went to a Jesuit College in Egenhoven (unfortunately destroyed by a fire in 1940) and the manuscripts mostly about the Jesuit Order that went to Saint Michel in Etterbeek.

A. Bultheel



Bosmans manuscript

³Now available as Google books. See <http://eulerarchive.maa.org/pages/E786.html>.